



The Critic as Consumer: Film Study in the University, "Vertigo", and the Film Canon

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You have always been concerned in your work with the question of whether "reality" exists outside of the work of the artist . . .

Yes, the basis of my whole narrative is the relationship with reality. It's remained a mystery to me all my life, this relationship. The problem keeps cropping up. In psychiatric terms I think this lack of relationship with reality is called . . . I've forgotten the term. But when the artist has the brush in his hand with which he knows he can represent reality in a totally invented form, he *must* have doubts as to the existence of reality itself as an objective quality. That's how Kandinsky was able to state that the white canvas was the most beautiful painting.

Doesn't "relationship with reality" include the question of being "understood"?

That's of no importance. In modern art, the rule of similarity no longer exists. There are only two rules, two categories in modern art: expression and benefit. Expression, on a white canvas, exists: I have expressed myself. Benefit there is none, but what the hell . . . Or when Duchamps sent a toilet bowl to the Armory Show in New York in 1916 and said it was a protest against war, it was a form of expression, but without benefit: it was still an ordinary toilet bowl.

In the cinema, where the machine that makes it depends itself on a purely chemical reproduction process, isn't it even more likely that the creative "brush"-like treatment of

reality will be curbed?

Yes, literature is more open. A dog in literature is a universal dog, but a dog in the cinema is only that particular dog.

So the cinema is the least Platonic art form, the one that deals least with essence and most with detail? Is it therefore a good vehicle for what you call "basic experience," which is after all a dealing in essence?

Yes, cinema is quite passively linked to reality, to photographic reality.

And yet you've permitted that almost all your works were translated into this medium which cannot but reduce them in stature?

In fact . . . but the cinema can also do marvellous things that literature can't. It can and does change reality, often in an overpowering, arrogant way. Maybe more so than other arts can. In literature and painting that which changes reality is above all the style of a work. It's style that introduces change. But the cinema changes reality itself. In other arts style is mysterious and personal in imposing itself upon an existing reality, but in the cinema the artist—the director, in this case—uses the camera in order to create a totally new reality, to create a new reality in the place of the old one, and that, too, is part of the chemistry of the camera, which lends itself to manipulation. Style is not a manipulation, it is an expression. But with the camera, dealing with reality becomes manipulation.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT WEXMAN

The Critic as Consumer: Film Study in the University, *Vertigo*, and the Film Canon

The world of art, a sacred island systematically and ostentatiously opposed to the profane, everyday world of production, a sanctuary for gratuitous, disinterested activity in a universe given over to money and self-interest, offers, like theology in a past epoch, an imaginary anthropology obtained by

denial of all the negations really brought about by the economy. —Pierre Bourdieu¹

Though critics customarily consider themselves disinterested observers, their activities are shaped by concrete historical processes. The recent development of a group of film

intellectuals within the American academy can be examined as an example of this interaction. Given the body of radical theory produced by many members of this newly constituted intellectual group, one might well assume that the function they have served has been a progressive one. However, these progressive goals operate in a far more limited way than is generally understood. Because the work of film intellectuals leads to practical valuations of film texts, one can view current scholarly practices in the light of these valuations. Why are certain cinematic texts chosen for special attention? Which elements in these texts are singled out for critical discussion?

Film studies, with its fluid and shifting canon, lends itself particularly well to this kind of sociologically oriented inquiry. The past ten years have marked a change in *Sight and Sound's* decennial listings of the ten greatest of all time, suggesting that values held by contemporary film scholars and critics are historically shifting.² In 1982, four films appeared on the *Sight and Sound* list that had not appeared on the 1972 list: *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), *The Searchers* (1956), *The Seven Samurai* (1954), and *Vertigo* (1958). The appearance of the three American titles may be partly accounted for by the continuing vitality of the auteur theory. Also, the growing interest in film's status as cultural production entailing a complex industry and elaborating generic models has certainly influenced such preferences—as well as the lower regard for films like *The Passion of Joan of Arc* and *Persona*. Neither of these trends, however, account for the fact that three of *Sight and Sound's* newly canonized films were made in the United States during the cold-war period of the fifties. An analysis of the politics of contemporary film scholarship must take such historical specifics into account.

Of the three American films on the list, *Vertigo* is the text that says most about the relation between film aesthetics and the ideology of criticism. Of the three films, *Vertigo* most owes its preeminence to the opinions of cinema scholars rather than the enthusiasm of less “committed” film fans. Moreover, unlike *Singin' in the Rain* and *The*



VERTIGO

Searchers, *Vertigo* has generated a sizable body of conflicting critical writing that can be revealingly classified according to ideological positions. In terms of evaluation, what is noteworthy about this critical writing is the *centrality* it grants to this particular film. The film is canonized even by those who argue against it. As Janet Staiger has pointed out, “Some films will be chosen for extensive discussion and analysis, others will be ignored. . . . As ideal fathers, these select films are given homage or rebelled against.”³

Critics of *Vertigo* can be broadly divided into two groups. One line of approach, inaugurated by Robin Wood's pioneering 1967 study, speaks to the issue of Hitchcock as an artist, claiming that *Vertigo* masterfully manipulates the codes of “pure cinema,” thereby revealing the creative genius of its director. By contrast, for another group of critics *Vertigo's* value rests on the way it reveals—or enacts—an objectification and fetishization of women which is at the heart

of cinema's codes of voyeuristic pleasure. These critical postures correspond closely to the two roles that Gramsci assigns to intellectuals in society. The first role is the one assigned to traditional intellectuals, who are "the dominant group's subalterns, exercising the subaltern's function of social hegemony and political government."⁴ Those who argue *Vertigo's* status as "pure cinema" rationalize the hegemonic functions served by particular cinematic institutions at work in the film. The second role Gramsci assigns to intellectuals is an "organic" one, by which a rising group theorizes its own entrance into the upper reaches of the social power structure. From this perspective *Vertigo's* feminist critics can be viewed as a subgroup of a larger group of women intellectuals who have elaborated a discourse on women at a moment when women have been entering high-level positions both within and outside of the academy. The progressive project of this group is entangled with methodological constraints that prevent it from addressing broader and more historically specific issues of class, race, and economics.

To better understand the assumptions implicit in the work of the former of these two groups of intellectuals, we can contrast the insights made possible by the task-oriented approach advocated by Wayne Booth, an approach which follows the development of the text with a view to determining what principles governed its shaping. Donald Spoto's recent biography of Hitchcock, which traces the development of *Vertigo* from the director's purchase of the novel *D'entre les morts*, offers a wealth of material apposite to this approach.⁵ Hitchcock's difficulties in putting together a screenplay led him to engage several different writers for the project, and he ultimately instructed Samuel Taylor to write a script without reading the original novel. Taylor constructed the film's narrative around the director's conceptions for various individual scenes. In the meantime, however, Hitchcock had committed himself to using James Stewart and Kim Novak, then two of the most popular stars in Hollywood. And he had also sent his production designer Henry Bumstead on several trips to San Francisco to scout loca-

tions. These circumstances suggest that the stars and locations were primary considerations in the director's mind, and that the actual script and story were a secondary and contingent concern.

Given Hitchcock's highly developed sensitivities about the commercial appeal of his movies, it is easy to understand why these particular features of the film, its stars and its status as travelogue, should have preoccupied him from the start. In a now-classic study, Edgar Morin has examined the role played by stars—especially female stars—in the film industry, which promoted a cult of romantic love based on the mystification of female beauty, manufacturing what it then called "love goddesses." As a successful practitioner within the Hollywood industry, Hitchcock was adept at exploiting the images of such major Hollywood stars as Cary Grant and Grace Kelly.

In *Vertigo*, Kim Novak's position as a manufactured romantic idol is a crucial component of the film's power. It has often been noted that the story of an ordinary young woman who is transformed into a celestial beauty by a controlling man recreates the director's relationships with his female stars, many of whom were also transformed into erotic ideals under Hitchcock's own tutelage. But such a reading of Novak's Madeleine-Judy role, by emphasizing the control exercised by an individual director-auteur over his star, shifts the focus of discussion away from the meaning inherent in the star's own presence. In fact, Hitchcock's obsession with controlling his leading ladies, which grew as his career in films progressed, can be seen as an adaptation that for a long period of time enabled him to function more effectively in the environment of commercialized eroticism that defined the Hollywood style. This pattern of behavior did not emerge until *after* Hitchcock had embarked on a career in commercial movie-making and did not reach full-blown proportions until the director had established himself in Hollywood. Thus, the individuated analysis of his romantic obsessions posited by Spoto and others requires the addition of the societally determined mediating term represented by the commercialized eroticism of the film industry.



Kim Novak (as Madeleine), James Stewart

In the case of Kim Novak, control over her image was exercised not just by Hitchcock but more importantly by industry mogul Harry Cohn, president of Columbia Pictures, who arranged to have her constantly watched, forced her to live in her studio dressing room and eat only food prepared by the studio chef, and called her “the fat Polack.”⁶ Like Judy, Novak was docile enough to accept this bullying for the most part, while occasionally fighting for a modicum of recognition of her own identity—managing, for instance, to keep her surname despite its ethnic overtones.

Specific aspects of the Novak persona that are invoked in her portrayal of Judy include her well-known preference for the color lavender, brought to mind when Judy tries the appeal she herself might have for Scottie by selecting a lavender dress for their first dinner together. By contrast, Madeleine is associated not with the part of the Novak image that speaks of the ordinary young woman chosen for greatness, but with the star’s etherialized, aestheticized beauty. The repeated profile shots of Madeleine not only call to mind Novak’s then well-publicized classic profile but also evoke the conventions of relief portraiture found in antique cameos and coins. This association of the star’s transcendent beauty with the traditions of high art is further alluded to by the connection between Madeleine and the portrait of Carlotta hanging in the art museum.

The film’s skillful manipulation of the Novak persona in the Madeleine–Judy figure opposes the spiritual transcendence of the star as erotic ideal to the quotidian material forces that contribute to her ascendancy. Such a portrayal is deeply implicated in the contradictory role assigned to contemporary bour-

geois women, who act as purveyors of a mystique of beauty at the same time as they are shaped into consumers of the products of a commercial beauty industry. The importance Hitchcock attached to his star, creating a script individually tailored to these aspects of her image, reflects his understanding of and collaboration with the practical and conflict-ridden nature of the American film industry’s investment in such figures.

The star system, however, is not the only cinematic institution addressed in *Vertigo*. Hitchcock’s predilection for spectacular settings throughout his career has often been remarked on, and this predilection, like his use of stars, plays a significant part in his commercial appeal. In this, he follows a well-defined tradition, for the first documentary films were travelogues, and the more encompassing institutions of commercial cinema itself are partly involved with the project of taking audiences to attractive faraway locales. Thus, the motto of one early studio became: “The world at your fingertips.” The early cinema’s concern with glamorous settings is not surprising, given the changes taking place in society as a whole at the end of the nineteenth century. Industrialization and vastly improved transportation systems had by then produced an increasingly mobile middle class with a sizable disposable income to spend on travel, an eager audience for cinematic fantasies of escape to alluring, exotic places. One need only recall films such as *Around the World in Eighty Days* and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* to appreciate how central such a travelogue function has remained for today’s movie audiences.

The cinema’s preoccupation with travel is not without ideological implications. In his book *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken, 1976), Dean MacCannell argues that “tourist attractions are an unplanned typology of structure that provides direct access to the modern consciousness or ‘world view,’ that tourist attractions are precisely analogous to the religious symbolism of primitive peoples. . . . This effort of the international middle class to coordinate the differentiations of the world into a single ideology is intimately linked to its capacity to subordinate other peoples to its

values, industry and future designs.”(2, 13) By disseminating and domesticating the far-off, cinema participates in this rhetoric of tourism.

In *Vertigo* Hitchcock indulges the touristic impulse by showing all the famous sights of the San Francisco Bay area: the Golden Gate Bridge; the Embarcadero; Ernie’s, the city’s best-known restaurant; the art museum; a forest of giant sequoias; hilly streets; scenic, oceanside highways; and cable cars. As if to emphasize his function as tour guide, Hitchcock even sets the film’s climax in a location that exists solely as a tourist attraction (though it was doctored for the purposes of the plot). Here again, as happened in the case of his stars, Hitchcock selected these picture-postcard settings early in the production process and had the movie’s script tailored to accommodate them. Like Kim Novak, San Francisco is part of *Vertigo*’s beauty, beauty defined by a consumerist function.

Both the romantic ideal of the love goddess and the escapist ideal of the tourist attraction have a material dimension, for both beauty and travel are multi-billion-dollar industries. Though the traces of these two related cinematic institutions are readily observable in Hitchcock’s film, they are ignored in the commentaries of its art-oriented critics. Whether there is or is not an “essential” or “pure” cinema, art-oriented critics have used this concept to avoid confronting the specific commercial strategies on which much of *Vertigo*’s appeal is based. By such time-honored means, borrowed from traditional aesthetics, abstract theoretical formulations enshrine art as a “sanctuary of disinterested activity,” while concealing the operations of ideology within it, thereby rationalizing existing social relations.

The feminist critics of *Vertigo* pose a different issue, for as organic intellectuals such critics work within a discernible political agenda designed to further the interests of the group with which they identify. The question here becomes: how does this agenda operate in practice? Who, exactly, profits?

The approach taken by most contemporary feminist film scholarship limits the application of its conclusions to bourgeois women, a limitation which results not only from its selection of cinematic data but also from the methodol-

ogy most feminist critics commonly use. The methodology at issue here is psychoanalysis. Inspired by Laura Mulvey’s essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” which uses *Vertigo* as one of its main examples, feminist critics have used psychoanalytic models to open up cinematic texts to a wealth of reading strategies. Following Mulvey, many feminist critics have accepted psychoanalysis as a key to the essential nature of mainstream cinema. Like traditional film intellectuals, feminists’ allegiance to such an idealist position, which some assume explains *all* commercial narrative film, can obscure the workings of more culturally specific codes within the cinematic text. To derive analyses that can articulate the specific operations of patriarchy within a particular culture, psychoanalytic perspectives must be integrated with other critical models.

Christine Gledhill, questioning this use of psychoanalysis, has argued for a form of cultural analysis that looks not simply to idealized psychoanalytic models but to the specific social practices by which such models are activated.⁷ The distinct discourses that construct social reality can be obscured by a critical approach that uses an essentializing psychoanalytic methodology to interpolate cinematic material that yields too readily to such an approach. Indeed, it can be argued that Hitchcock’s recurrent preoccupation with psychoanalysis in his films has often served as a “Maguffin” (to use his term), distracting the viewer’s attention from other, more hidden aspects of the text, his shrewd co-optation of a popular discourse that could locate the roots of social dis-ease in psychological rather than economic causes.

For an example of Hitchcock’s appropriation of such displacements, consider his comments about what attracted him to *Marnie*: “The fetish idea. A man who wants to go to bed with a thief, just like other men have a yen for a Chinese woman or a colored woman.”⁸ Given the widespread interest in psychoanalytic readings of Hitchcock’s films, it is noteworthy that no critic has commented on the director’s remarkable equation of fetishism with miscegenation here. And, more importantly, no one has observed the workings of a similar displacement of racial and class issues into the sphere of sexuality functioning in the

films themselves. Like Hitchcock, feminists committed to psychoanalysis may interpret all cinematic practices in terms of universalizing concepts of fetishization, lack, and voyeuristic exchange. Whether these psychoanalytic operations actually form the essential base of all cinematic art or not, the feminist critics of Hitchcock sometimes tend to describe his films as though they relied solely on such operations. However, a reading of *Vertigo* which poses history as what Fredric Jameson has called an “absent cause” shows other strategies at work.

In a recent essay Michael Rogin mapped the ideological terrain that forms the background of American films of the cold-war period.⁹ Using psychoanalytic theory in conjunction with this historical background, Rogin describes the cold-war period as one in which polarized conceptions of “otherness” were particularly evident. In the popular imagination, such conceptions often focused on women. Images of women were often deployed to displace and domesticate fears of a more ungovernable xenophobic cast, fears of the Russians and of “subversives.” Such displacements can be negotiated in the cinematic texts themselves through a strategy of paired oppositions, which develop as the narrative proceeds in such a way as to provide the spectator with increasingly refined definitions of the terms involved. In *Vertigo*, an analysis of these paired oppositions, which center on the Madeleine-Judy figure, suggests the limitations of psychoanalytically based textual approaches. Issues such as gender difference, regression, and the organization of filmic space through the agency of the gaze, the mainstays of many psychoanalytic readings, may be less central to our understanding of the operation of many filmic texts than many feminists now consider them.

In the case of gender difference, it is important to recognize that more culturally specific differences may exist within this universal opposition. In *Vertigo* the first of these culturally specific differences initially emphasizes the class contrast between Madeleine and Midge Wood, with whom we see the film’s protagonist Scottie Fergusson at the opening of the film. While the all-American Midge appears untainted by conspicuous marks of

class, Madeleine is firmly positioned as upper-class. Her family owns a shipyard; she lives in a luxurious apartment building and drives an expensive car. First glimpsed amid the opulent surroundings of an expensive restaurant, she also affects, as do most of Hitchcock’s heroines, an upper-class accent. Indeed, Scottie’s obsession with her, seen in this context, becomes largely an obsession with money and class.

But Madeleine’s upper-class image entails its opposite: the lower-class Judy. Though Scottie spends a considerable amount of money trying to recreate this working-class woman into the upper-class figure he originally idolized, the fruitlessness of his attempt is ultimately exposed when he sees Judy’s telltale necklace. Unlike the clothes Scottie buys Judy, this necklace cannot be duplicated. Its status as a symbol of family jewels implies the inherited wealth that marks a truly upper-class person: an aristocrat. In one sense, then, Scottie’s shock on seeing this necklace can be construed as the shock of the nouveau-riche aspirant who discovers his inability to buy his way into the upper reaches of old-money society.

Scottie’s inchoate identification with aristocratic values grows out of his disdain for work. He rejects the idea of gainful employment for himself at the beginning of the film and later tries to persuade both Midge and Judy to follow his example. Though he succeeds with the malleable Judy, Midge is more resistant. When Scottie rejects Midge’s parodic portrait of Carlotta, he is rejecting her Yankee practicality (Midge can’t take painting seriously because she has to “make a living”)

Kim Novak (as Judy), James Stewart



and literalness (she demystifies the portrait by treating its subject as just another woman, equal to herself). Midge alienates herself from Scottie in this scene by refusing to take seriously his un-American fantasies of aristocratic elegance and ease.

These fantasies, which are focused on the figure of Madeleine, are fantasies not of America but of Europe. The old-world idea of aristocracy is evoked in repeated associations between Madeleine and Europe: her husband's British accent; the Viennese accent of Pop Liebl, who recounts her history; and the Spanish-style mission she frequents. Yet by further defining her social position, such associations also imply still another opposition, an opposition focused on the figure of Carlotta Valdez. Carlotta, who grew up in a Spanish mission town but "danced in the cabarets," becomes a presence of charged ambiguity. Is she a descendant of old Spanish aristocracy, or is she lower-class Latino? The film never specifies, preferring instead to situate her in a realm of exotic class marginality. *Vertigo's* series of oppositions, beginning with gender difference, leading to class difference and from there to ethnic difference, must stop short with the image of Carlotta: the racial opposition that is the logical extension of this series remains, for Hitchcock, unrepresentable. Yet it is significant that Scottie's nightmare reveals Elster not with the blonde, patrician Madeleine but instead beside the darkly ambiguous Carlotta. In the nightmare, Carlotta represents what ultimately terrorizes Scottie, and the fears Carlotta arouses in him are more culturally specific than either Hitchcock or his feminist critics are in a position to acknowledge.

Vertigo's buried references to issues of class and race were contained during the fifties as part of a nationalistic ideology that defined American society in terms of its ability to achieve world dominance. In the context of this cultural fantasy, the meaning of the past in *Vertigo*, so often invoked by critics as a sign of psychological regression, takes on a more political coloration. In the figure of Scottie, the past does indeed connote regression; but Scottie's private dilemma displaces more political connotations attached to the invocation of the past. The film's first reference to

the past explicitly connects it to the political sphere: Gavin Elster speaks nostalgically of "the old San Francisco," when men had "freedom and power." The cold-war connotations of the phrase "freedom and power" are unmistakable, for America was at the time seeking power on the international scene in the name of freedom, and it justified these aspirations in part by invoking the country's past heroism in "saving the world for freedom" in World War II.

When the past is next invoked in the film, it refers not to politics but to the figure of Carlotta Valdez, whose rich lover long ago abandoned her and took her child. Pop Liebl's explanation of her tragedy recalls Elster's earlier comments: "Men could do these things in those days. They had the freedom and the power." Here the motif of sexual exploitation is central, but Pop Liebl's story also carries overtones of a past era of American imperialism characterized by the freedom and the power to colonize and plunder, whether the object of exploitation was the resources of an underdeveloped country or the body of an underprivileged woman.

As Rogin points out, the word "freedom" has been variously used throughout American history to construct oppositions which could uphold American interests at the expense of a racial, ethnic, or national "other." Such oppositions recast contradictions within American society itself into a discourse of demonology. In the cold-war period, the most salient contradiction existed between the "free" individual and a newly oppressive mass society characterized by sophisticated patterns of surveillance.

In *Vertigo* such issues are raised through the portrayal of law. Scottie, initially presented as a member of the law-enforcement bureaucracy, withdraws from his responsibilities because he feels he has faltered in carrying out his duty as a watchdog of society's interests. He then becomes a "wanderer," free inasmuch as he is detached from the demands of the law and thus disengaged from the functions of surveillance required in the mass society of fifties America. However, Scottie's relationship with the law is not thereby severed but merely mystified, for his surveillance function merely shifts to a more personalized

site: Madeleine's body. But the film insures that this site must also be regarded in relation to the law, for later, at the hearing on Madeleine's death, he is severely chastized by the judge for his failure to perform his "duty." This censorious judgment gains the imprimatur of a higher order when Hitchcock reveals two male clerics seated behind Madeleine's "injured" husband. Finally, when a nun appears in the belltower during the film's concluding scene, Scottie's dilemma is finally displaced from a public, male world into a private, female one. What is initially presented as the suffocating obligations felt by a fifties American bureaucratic functionary to a group of ruling males—Scottie's job on the police force—is completely transformed into a motif of religious guilt centered on sexual desire. At the same time, Scottie's statement in this scene that he wishes to be "free of the past" displaces terms initially presented with specific political connotations into the realm of the private and the personal.

America's cold-war aspirations to global supremacy are expressed in *Vertigo* not only by the film's depiction of time but also by its depiction of space. One can speak of two opposed conceptions of space operating in *Vertigo*: the panorama and the vortex. Hitchcock announces this opposition during the credit sequence, in which Saul Bass's abstract designs exploit the cinema's capacity to create two-dimensional patterns that can suggest three-dimensional space by means of an optical illusion. Immediately afterward, in the film's first scene of the rooftop chase, this conception is connected with images of the natural world, images that will be developed throughout the narrative: the panorama of the San Francisco skyline in the background followed by the vortex created by Hitchcock's famous track-out, zoom-in shots depicting Scottie's vertiginous vision of the street below.

The panorama has obvious affinities with the touristic world view described earlier, defining a "picturesque," two-dimensional space that negates the actual forces of production and labor that contributed to its creation. Such a two-dimensional, picture-postcard view appears first in Hitchcock's narrative proper as a backdrop to the apartment belonging to the all-American Midge. Later, how-

ever, when Scottie visits Elster's office, the background becomes more ominous, for the scene outside of Elster's window depicts the shipyards, implying another world beyond the ocean and the role played by American industrial supremacy in the domination of this world. At the same time, the dominance-oriented two-shots of Scottie and Elster in this scene shift the terms of spatial perception. In contrast to the shot-reverse shot technique of the earlier scene in Midge's apartment, which isolates characters within their own surrounding space, the power relationships represented in Scottie's first scene with Elster reflect an awareness of how the relative positioning of the human subject within the space may suggest structures of dominance.

As the action progresses, two possible positions are defined: the camera's horizontal tracking movements associated with Madeleine suggest a harmonious integration into the three-dimensional space, while the vertical camera movements associated with Scottie's vertigo suggest the fear of being engulfed by the space. Madeleine is often flanked by portals and archways that begin to define more specifically the depth of the filmic field. The depth of field is more dramatically emphasized in scenes in which the camera tracks toward her and in other scenes where she herself approaches the camera to the strains of Bernard Herrmann's Wagnerian musical score. The alluring invitation implied by this three-dimensional quality, however, accelerates to a frightening pitch of intensity during the vertigo shots. At these points the viewer's harmonious incorporation within the space, which is achieved by the complementary alternation of camera movement toward an object and the movement of the object toward the camera, is compressed into a single, humanly impossible operation. This series of oppositions is initiated by the early scene in Elster's office, which specifically associates the opening out of the cinematic space with American industrial power and expansionist aspirations, thereby adding an explicitly political dimension to the anxieties over spatial dominance that are so pervasive throughout the film.

The process by which such political anxieties about dominance and otherness are dis-

placed in *Vertigo* onto the image of the woman is focused on a specific spatial image: the spiral. This image, repeatedly associated with both Madeleine and Carlotta's hairstyles, strikes Scottie powerfully in the art museum scene. The sequence involves both the camera's tracking movement, which invades the filmic space, and the inviting illusion of depth created by the spiral shape of Madeleine's French twist. Many of the film's suppressed issues are condensed into this spiral image, for through it the promise held out by the blonde Madeleine's seductive presence is represented as an invitation to fuse with a hollow shell. The erotic promise of this image is consummated in the final love scene, where the camera circles around the romantic couple in an active imitation of the contours of the spiral associated with Madeleine. Yet, rather than exposing an enticing void into which male fantasies of power and dominance can be projected, Madeleine's confused dependency may conceal the threatening intractability of the alien Carlotta. Thus the inviting horizontal movement suggested by the women's hair leads to the traumatic vertical oscillations created by the spiral of the stairway during the tower sequences. These sequences depict an ultimate loss of control over the cinematic space, and they end with the fatal fall of an exalted female love object who has represented a projection of male power fantasies.

The implications of the film's spatial oppositions, however, finally culminate not in Madeleine and Carlotta but in Judy. If Madeleine, whose head seen from behind is dominated by the spiral of her hairstyle, invites Scottie to merge with a hollow space, Judy represents not a projective male fantasy but an actual woman. After Scottie's first encounter with her, however, Hitchcock's camera executes a similar track forward into the back of Judy's head. Judy's hair, though, does not coil into an inviting spiral. And this time, rather than losing itself in the woman's body offered as a void, the camera decisively reveals the "other" which has been suppressed by the film's romantic fantasy. For the movement culminates as Judy's head turns toward us, and we are then permitted access to her own mental images, images at odds with Scottie's

—and the viewer's—partial and mistaken conceptions about her.

In this image of a woman's head turning, Hitchcock focuses on a representation of otherness that uses gender opposition to emphasize the film's theme of romantic love. But this image of otherness, as we have seen, contains far more complex and localized associations than feminist psychoanalytic theory can account for. As *Vertigo* illustrates, the oppression of women in our culture is intimately related to particular political conditions, and the forms of its representation often exploit such associations. Indeed, the film's abrupt and unresolved ending can be viewed as a signal of its refusal to confront the implications of its strategies. In *Vertigo* Hitchcock has masked the ideological workings of racism and xenophobia beneath a discourse of sexuality that is itself idealized as romantic love.

If the text of Hitchcock's film employs the techniques of cinematic art and the motifs of sexual difference, these techniques and motifs function in part to mask less familiar meanings. Though its rhetorical disguises have seduced film scholars, *Vertigo* is neither a work of pure artistry nor an exercise in essential psychoanalytic truth. Hitchcock, after all, did not create his films in an ivory tower surrounded by cinematic essences; nor did he make them amid the private surroundings of the analytic session. He was a businessman as well as an artist. In 1958 he embarked on a commercial enterprise entitled *Vertigo*, starring Kim Novak and San Francisco. Cinema scholars have now honored this venture as one of their top ten favorites. Such a valuation reflects not only on its object but also on those who sit in judgment. Gramsci's paradigm of the role played by intellectuals in society suggests the ideological stakes involved in interpretations of cultural texts. Film scholars, like others, have class interests at stake: we are not only critics but also consumers.

NOTES

1. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (New York: Cambridge University Press), p. 197.
2. For the 1982 list, see *Sight and Sound* 51, no. 4 (Autumn 1982): 243. In a 1978 survey of critics conducted by the Belgian Film Archives regarding important American films, *Vertigo* was ranked only eighteenth. See *The Most Important and Misappre-*

ciated *American Films Since the Beginning of Cinema* (Brussels: Royal Film Archives of Belgium, 1978). This jump in popularity preceded *Vertigo*'s re-release in 1983.

3. Janet Staiger, "The Politics of Film Canons," *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 2 (Spring 1985): 4.

4. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hore and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 11.

5. Donald Spoto, *The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock* (New York: Ballentine, 1983). The making of *Vertigo* is discussed on pp. 425–35.

6. See Bob Thomas, *King Cohn: The Life and Times of Harry Cohn* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1967), pp. 325–31.

7. Christine Gledhill, "Developments in Feminist Film Criticism," *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams (Baltimore, MD: University Publications of America, 1984), pp. 18–48.

8. François Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), p. 227.

9. Michael Rogin, "Kiss Me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood, and Cold War Movies," *Representations*, no. 6 (Spring 1984): 1–36.

Reviews

KISS OF THE SPIDER WOMAN

Director: Hector Babenco. Producer: David Weisman. Script: Leonard Schrader, from the novel by Manuel Puig. Photography: Radolfo Sanchez. Music: John Neschling. Distribution: Island Alive.

Hector Babenco's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is perhaps the most brilliant proof that Brazilian cinema is coming of age.¹ After nationalizing the film industry's main sectors, the state has made domestic production competitive against "Hollywood imperialism" by various means—subsidies and promotional services, coproduction arrangements and quotas requiring theaters to screen a certain number of domestic films per year. A substantial relaxation in censorship has widened the "legal space" of film production, enabling directors to keep pace with the social and cultural transformations Brazil is facing.² Concurrently, a generation of film-makers has emerged which retains Cinema Novo's political interests while eschewing its didacticism and experimentalism. Directors such as Babenco, Reichenbach, Jabor and Yamazaki have attained international reputations and, more importantly, have paved the road to socially committed film-making capable of addressing large audiences. The "popular-commercial" format of their films (including the use of soap opera stars) and their freewheeling attitude towards "cinematic pleasure" (abundant use of sex and humor) could not but evoke sharp criticism from the orthodox left; as a result, says Mark Osiel, "the directors now exist in tension not only with the state (and its censorship), but also with some sectors of the radical intelligentsia (and hence with their own past)".³

It is no exaggeration to say that with his last film Babenco has perfected the competitive-

ness of Brazilian cinematography while providing a lesson to the left. Unlike *Pixote* (1981), his impressive but not too popular story of homeless youth, largely played by nonprofessionals, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* utilizes famous stars and therefore takes a significant step towards commercial success. William Hurt and Sonia Braga are so well known to the American public that it is easy to foresee wide distribution of this film, especially in view of Hurt's prize at Cannes. In addition, the film's potential of winning an international market is considerably increased by its being a cinematic adaptation of a famous Argentine novel by Manuel Puig.⁴ Within this palatable framework, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* engages with a number of blatantly political questions from a leftist point of view. As I shall argue, it is in fact a film about and for the left.

Unlike many political films, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is not interested in the depiction of the enemy without—the repressive "system" that imprisons and tortures the two protagonists; that enemy is, so to speak, taken for granted. What is under scrutiny, rather, is the enemy within, as is visually implied by the 360-degree pan of the cell's walls which opens the film: the narrative space curves around the problematic relationship between Valentin and Molina.

Valentin is a hard-core leftist from an upper-class background, who ruled out pleasure from his life-style in the conviction that it would signify the persistence of his bourgeois origin. Pompous, dogmatic and cultivated, he has all the theoretical weapons to decode social and cultural production. Obsessed with explaining everything, he reduces all aspects of life to the ultimate reality of "the struggle." Hence his contemptuous attitude towards

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NOTES

³ **The Politics of Film Canons**

Janet Staiger

Cinema Journal, Vol. 24, No. 3. (Spring, 1985), pp. 4-23.

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⁹ **Kiss Me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood, and Cold War Movies**

Michael Rogin

Representations, No. 6. (Spring, 1984), pp. 1-36.

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